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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 001275

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR DS/IP/NEA AND NEA/ARP
LONDON FOR ETHAN GOLDRICH

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SUBJECT: 8,000 BAHRAINIS PEACEFULLY PROTEST US OPERATIONS
IN IRAQI HOLY CITIES

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Susan L. Ziadeh for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY. Bahrain's Shi'a leadership organized a march in which 8,000 Bahrainis peacefully protested US military actions in Najaf and other holy cities of Iraq. Representing Parliament, Sunni Council of Representatives (COR) Chairman Ahmed Khalifa Al Dahrani issued a public statement expressing Parliament's concern for the "brutal carnage" in Iraqi cities. Prominent Shi'a parliamentarians emphasized that Parliament's statement is a condemnation of all violence in Iraq, both coalition forces and Iraqi elements. They reiterated that Bahraini Shi'a do not support Muqtada Al Sadr and that his rise to prominence is only based on his father's laurels. While the protest and parliamentary statement are clearly expressions of Bahrainis' concern for Iraqis, they also reflect a measure of local politics with Sunnis jumping on a popular Shi'a bandwagon. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) On Friday August 13, approximately 8,000 Bahrainis (RSO estimate) marched in protest against US military actions in Najaf and other holy cities of Iraq. Organized by Bahrain's leading Shi'a opposition society Al Wifaq, demonstrators walked the customary four kilometer course between the Seef and Pearl roundabouts following Friday sermons, chanting slogans demanding a halt to US military actions. Hundreds of women protested separately on a nearby route. Internet chatrooms called for a protest in front of the US Embassy which did not materialize. Eyewitnesses and the press reported that the protests were peaceful and there were no reports of injuries, casualties or arrests. A prominent Shi'a Editor-in-Chief Mansour Al Jamri in his August 15 column in al-Wasat praised the police for their low-key presence at the demonstration.

13. (U) Bahraini religious leaders made statements in both the English and Arabic local press on August 14. Al Wifaq's President Shaikh Ali Salman stated that (US) occupiers of Iraq need to take full responsibility for the "bloodshed of innocent civilians in Iraq." He added that the USG creates trouble in Iraq to ensure the continuity of its presence. Prominent religious Shi'a clerics Shaikh Issa Qassim and Shaikh Abdulla Al-Guraifi publicly endorsed Salman's comments. Sunni Parliamentarian and member of Al Minbar Islamiyya (Muslim Brotherhood) Shaikh Mohammed Khalid, who participated with Shaikh Salman in the protest, told the press that he wanted to send a clear message to the US administration that Bahraini Sunni and Shi'a are united against US occupation and "desecration" of religious sites.

14. (C) Sunni Chairman of the elected Council of Representatives (COR) Ahmed Khalifa Al Dahrani issued a public statement August 13 on behalf of the Parliament condemning the events in Iraq, expressing its concern for the "brutal carnage" Iraqi cities have experienced and that American forces have waged attacks in Najaf close to the Imam Ali shrine. In conversations with Shi'a COR members, Shaikh Mohammed Al Abbas told PolOFF on August 14 that he was gratified to receive a call from Al Dahrani requesting a meeting of COR members to approve a public statement. COR member Ali Samaheji told PolOFF on August 14 that he was surprised that Al Dahrani took the initiative to support the Shi'a, demonstrating that Al Dahrani is "a man for all Bahrainis." Both COR members claimed that all available Sunni and Shi'a COR members agreed with the statement's content.

15. (C) However, Shaikh Mohammed Al Abbas insisted that Parliament's statement was also a condemnation of all violence in Iraq, whether by coalition forces or Iraqi elements. He added that the Shi'a do not support Muqtada Al Sadr and that Al Sadr's rise to prominence is only based on his father's laurels and suffering. "Al Sadr set in motion a violence machine he can't control," Al Abbas said. MP Samaheji also said that Bahrain's religious clerics do not support Al Sadr and no one called for action in Bahrain in support of Al Sadr. Yousif Zailalabedeem Zainal told PolOFF on August 14 that the Islamic Bloc of Parliament will meet with Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammed bin Mubarak Al Khalifa on August 16 to present a letter of concern protesting coalition troops fighting near Najaf's Imam Ali shrine.

16. (C) COMMENT. While the protest and parliamentary statement are clearly heartfelt expressions of Bahrainis' concern for Iraqis, they also represent some measure of gamesmanship and local politics. Perhaps out of concern for being outmaneuvered by Shaikh Salman and Al Wifaq, COR Chairman Al Dahrani took the initiative to issue a public statement against US operations in Najaf. If this was his motivation, it appears to have worked: he has earned the appreciation of COR members who generally consider him a weak leader and the Prime Minister's man. END COMMENT.
ZIADDEH